

# STOREFRONT

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

P R E S S   R E L E A S E

## FUTURE SYSTEMS

May 1-June 6, 1992

Gallery Hours: Tuesday-Saturday 12-6 pm

Opening Reception: May 1, Friday, 6-8pm

"It's the performance of a building that counts, not the personality of its designer."

--Jan Kaplicky

Future Systems is a studio to explore the application of advanced and adaptive (spin-off and transfer) technology in architecture. Influenced by the advancements in automotive, marine, aviation and space industries, Future Systems has introduced a new generation of buildings that could be described as ecological and engineered architecture. Headed by Jan Kaplicky and Amanda Levete, and based in London, their projects are giving a new meaning to the functionalism by injecting obligations for versatility, efficiency and performance.

Proposed for the financial district of London, the 'Green Building' is a fully glazed and double-skinned office building. With fabric blinds, flexible mylar sheeted mirror and satinised light-reflectors, this 'greenhouse' like building is naturally lighted, heated, ventilated and cooled. By hanging the facades and floors from a tripod-like megastructure made of tubular steel legs, similar to those that are used in the off-shore oil platforms, the building offers maximum space while using minimum material. The result is an architecture that is engineered.

But the shapes of their architecture is causing much discomfort to the traditional formalists. 'Blob', their proposal for the National Gallery Extension off Trafalgar Square in London, and their second prize scheme for the Bibliotheque de France, which has been called 'breasts', are described by Alastair Gordon as "gloomed, dribbled, jellied, or molded from gelatins". (see "Future Systems" in REPORTS 2/3). In the National Gallery Extension Competition, 'Blob' unwittingly dribbled into the crossfire between historicism and modernism that was instigated by a self-appointed architectural critic by the name of Prince Charles, who dismissed the original prize-winning proposal by Ahrends, Burton + Koracek's as 'a monstrous carbunkle' and cleared the way for the building of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's 'decorated museum'. 'Blob' simply befell as an innocent bystander, as it offered neither historicism, modernism nor a mediation of the two. Across the 'Chunnel',

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Future Systems ran into yet another obstacle of political order, this time a self-appointed royalty known as Mitterand and his penchant for oversized monoliths manicured by the modernists. Although Future Systems' proposal may have served the interest of the librarians and protected the archives away from the sunlight better than Dominique Perrault's winning design, but 'breasts' just didn't interest those who were set to erect a hard monument.

Irritating host of nostalgic evangelists and the tyrants of four walls, the 'engineered gelatins' of Future Systems reappear further south in Athens in The New Acropolis Competition. This "great jelly-fish shaped blob of glass that oozes down a hillside across from the Acropolis" is a large and transparent space that gives an effective visual link between the proposed museum and the Acropolis. This "museum without walls" creates several interesting discourse on the distinction of times. While the Acropolis is made of matters permanent enough for gods, the museum is built with steel cables and compression rings in the spirit of technology. And while the Acropolis stands alone and heroic against the horizon, the museum humbly melts into the contour of the hillside like some new organic substance from the next century in the age of ecology.

Other projects by Future Systems incorporate technologies from space and military industries. 'Drop', a self-sufficient immediately available weekend pod unit for two people, is designed to be conveniently installed at any scenic and vacation spots with minimum site disturbance and maximum comfort. This six-meter-long cockpit vacation capsule made of two semi-monocogue shells, and protected by electro-photochromic glass, comes with fully equipped and integrated bed-sofa-TV-telephone-storage-bathroom-kitchen. 'Shelter', on the other hand, is a low-cost and large-span temporary shelter that can be either used during natural disasters or urban disaster of housings for the homeless. It is made of aluminum ribs and lightweight PVC coated polyester membranes to reflect up to 80 percent of solar radiation, while the impregnated metal particles on its inner surface help to warm the interior at night by reflecting and retaining the occupant's body heat. Designed like an umbrella, the entire structure can be collapsed for easy and quick transport by air or road.

Many critics have said that the work of Future Systems is before its time, and the realization of ideas is dependant on certain events that bring greater infusion of technology into culture. But the contradiction here is that these events has already occurred in the process of world becoming a globe of communications. The real meaning of the statement is that while the work of Future Systems is in sync with its time, it is architecture that's 'behind' time. While technology has advanced and marched into almost every aspect and corners of our lives, architecture is still beleaguered by its own historicism and romanticism, and formal and theoretical constructs as ancient as the Hellenic often gets more privileged attention than the challange of creating an entirely new architecture in the absence of gravity. While other fields have either embraced or nurtured technology, architecture continues to shun and dismiss the omni-presence of technology, somewhat of amazing feat with a few exceptions in the works of Buckminster Fuller, Jean Prouve, Konrad Wachsmann and others. And while our cities are turning into " . . . grim, grey places, full of obsolete second-third-fourth-rate buildings, new and old, held together

by an infrastructure that is falling apart" (Ron Herron in the review of FUTURE SYSTEMS' exhibition at Architectural Association in 1987, AAFile 14), there is no sign of architecture bearing any new and radical strategy of reconstructing the old or envisioning of the new.

In the midst of this run down, exhausted and retro-fitted state of architecture, the studio of Future Systems has, since 1979, and with David Nixon until 1987, put out a remarkable run of inventive works. While the collaboration between architecture and art, or the pronouncement of architecture as an art has always been admirable, and at times performed a convenient escape from the compromises and limitations of this discipline, seldom have there been works or theories that brings the re-alignment of architecture with engineering. The obscurity of this potentially powerful relationship is remarkably odd since much of modernism is based on the glorification of the industrial age and its many inventions, which by the way was mostly accomplished by the engineers.

With their drawings and models that are rendered in industrial design-like fashion, it is clear that Future Systems is optimistic and ambitious about the future. Their approach to "shaping the future of architecture is based on the celebration of technology, not the concealment of it", and is producing what Ron Herron describes as an "architecture without blemish". While we fear the future but trust the past, Future Systems looks at the mere presence of future as the only possible saving grace for architecture to rise from its own ashes and futilities.



*Born in Prague in 1937, Jan Kaplicky graduated from College of Applied Arts and Architecture in Prague (1956-62), and has worked with Foster Associates, Piano and Rogers, and Denys Lasdun and Partners. He taught at the Architectural Association from 1982-88.*

*Born in London in 1955, Amanda Levene graduated from the Architectural Association (1975-82), and has worked with Piano and Rogers (1984-89). She became a partner at Future Systems in 1989.*

The projects that will be presented in the exhibition are:

**Bibliothèque de France** (1989)

Gosfield Street (1989)

**Acropolis Museum** (1990)

Drop (1989)

Spire (1988)

Paris Bridge (1987)

**Green Building** (1990)

Chiswick Park Entrance (1990)

Ivy Trolley (1990)

Shelter (1989)

Kings Cross (1990)

Caravan (1991)

AS House (1991)

NASA Wardroom Table (1989) #

**MOMI Tent** (1991)

Frankfurt Kindergarten (1991)

*Projects in bold types are accompanied by models.*

*Ove Arup Associates were the engineers for all of the above projects except Spire, Ivy Trolley and Caravan.*

*# Client: NASA*

The exhibition will be documented in FRONT 5, a series of monographs on selected exhibitions and projects at STOREFRONT. This issue will also contain the documentation of an exhibition by Gunther Domenig, which preceded Future System, and will be jointly published with the Princeton Architectural Press this summer.

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